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A question of priorities

Guest editorial
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The President has presented us with what he says is a simple request — he has asked that Congress approve an additional \$87 billion for the war and reconstruction in Iraq.

So far, the president's plan for bringing stability to Iraq has relied on U.S. troops taking almost all the risks, and American taxpayers paying virtually all the bills.

Now, the President has asked for \$87 billion without a plan to transfer sovereignty to Iraq, without accountability for the funds

being spent, and without a real effort to have the U.N. play a meaningful role.

I fear that this funding will do little to bring safety and security to our troops or to lessen the threat of terrorism around the world.

In Iraq, the situation is tense. The Iraqi people remain without basic utility and emergency services. They live in fear that what has been done to build a fragile democracy could be erased any day by civil strife.

Our troops bear the brunt of these frustrations. They are the brave young men and women who are on the front lines in the desert heat, risking their lives every day to improve the situation in Iraq.

Our troops must not suffer the consequences of the Bush administration's derelict postwar planning. We must do all we can to guarantee their safety.

But before we throw billions of dollars at these problems, we must ask some hard questions about how these funds would be spent. We must ask that the administration justify every dollar it has requested. Will the funds actually help protect our troops? Will the funds truly move Iraq towards a system of democratic self-government? How has the previous \$80 billion been spent?

And although these are valid questions, I believe that the most important question is about priorities. The president's request for Iraq dwarfs investments in our

own country:

- He asks for nearly twice as much per capita for border protection and public safety services in Iraq as he budgets for America!

- He wants to spend 10 times more per capita in Iraq for new hospital facilities than we spend in the United States!

- He asks for 11 times more per capita for sewer and water services than he is willing to invest in our own cities!

- And he wants to spend 350 times more per capita on rehabilitating Iraq's electric power infrastructure than on fixing similar problems here at home!

If the \$87 billion asked for Iraq were to be spent here at home instead, we would be able to:

- Improve efficiency and security at our own border by investing in better technology to screen out

frequent legal low-risk border crossers.

- Correct the weakness in our own power grid — to ensure that the massive blackout of a few weeks ago does not happen again.

- Hire two million new teachers, police officers, or firefighters to teach or own children and protect our own homes and communities.

- Provide every uninsured child in America with \$7,909 for health coverage.

With the information we now have — or, rather, don't have — I cannot support the president's request for \$87 billion. I believe that these funds could be more wisely spent in Iraq. But, more importantly, I believe they would be better spent here at home.

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